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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [MOPS](#) [ELTN](#) [CAN](#) [PK](#) [AF](#)
SUBJECT: SUBJECT: BUILDING A STRATEGY ON AFGHANISTAN'S
SOUTHERN BORDER AT SPIN BOLDAK

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[C.](#) (C) KABUL 3814

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Classified By: Interagency Provincial Affairs Deputy Director Hoyt Yee
for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

[1.](#) (S) Summary. Cross-border issues have a fundamental impact on U.S. objectives in southern Afghanistan, and improved control of the southern border -- at the Spin Boldak crossing in particular -- is a critical path to international coalition and GIROA success. This message assesses the key challenges and outlines local action proposals for civil-military consideration by Embassy Kabul's Border Issues Working Group (BIWG) in four issue areas: border crossing by the Taliban, cross-border consultation, military control of the border, and reform of the border regime. Ultimately, however, a determined strategic approach that unifies diplomatic, military, and commercial dimensions requires national level attention. End Summary.

Visit of Embassy-ISAF Border Issues Working Group

[2.](#) (S) On November 27, members of the Embassy-ISAF Border Issues Working Group (BIWG) visited Kandahar Air Field for an extended briefing and discussion with Regional Command) South (RC-S) and Regional Platform) South (RP-S), including the RC-S Commander and the RC-S Senior Civilian Representative (SCR). This report reflects issues raised during that session. The group focused on the cross-border issues and the fundamental impact on U.S. objectives in southern Afghanistan. Improved control of the southern border -- at the Spin Boldak crossing in particular -- is a critical path to international coalition and GIROA success. While it will be possible to attack some of the border challenges through local and regional programs, ultimate success in dealing with this highly complex issue will require national level attention. The central challenge is broader than both the near-term objective of achieving population-focused COIN effects in RC-South and the long-term objective of increasing central government revenues as part of an ISAF exit strategy. As long as conflicted Afghan-Pakistani interests and a host of sub-national actors, including narco-traffickers and insurgents, preempt sovereignty, the southern border will remain an enduring source of instability.

TRADE AND MAJOR PLAYERS IN SPIN

¶4. (S) The quasi-legitimate trade regime and relative stability prevailing today at Spin Boldak (the actual crossing is Weesh-Chaman) provides short-term benefits to all involved in cross-border interchange. Obstructing freedom of movement is not in the interest of any of these parties. The participants include a complex array of interrelated political clans that extend to commercial trucking mafias, businessmen, local power brokers, members of the Karzai regime, narcotics traffickers, traditional Noorzai racketeers and Achekzai smugglers, private security protection rackets, and the Afghan Border Police (ABP). All have Pakistani counterparts, the majority of whom are fellow Pashtuns, among whom common ethnicity is more important than nationality. Other beneficiaries include ISAF, through safe passage of NATO supplies, and the Taliban, who likewise use Weesh-Chaman as a virtually unimpeded transit route. The incentives for maintaining the status quo are powerful and to a large degree countervail COIN objectives, assertion of central government authority, and the broader project of modern state-building.

¶5. (S) Low-grade hostility and lack of trust characterize relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, even though objectively their mutual interests in stability and trade should outweigh zero sum calculation. For example, Afghanistan requires Pakistan for access to the sea, and Pakistan requires Afghanistan for access to Central Asia; Spin Boldak is the most geographically logical crossing point for both, even though the volume of traffic at Torkham Gate in the East is currently greater. Instead, insecurity in Afghanistan keeps Pakistan's trade with Central Asia negligible, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that illicit and semi-licit trade is four times greater than legitimate commerce on the southern border.

¶6. (S) In addition to narcotics flowing south, smuggling travels in both directions, and Afghanistan is the source of substantial "unauthorized-trade" in vehicles, consumer

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electronics, and other goods that enter Afghanistan duty-free under the 1965 Trade and Transit Agreement, and then return for resale in Pakistan. The losses to tariff revenues from this gray market trade as well as smuggling of licit goods are enormous. Most financial and political benefits accrue to political clans in Kandahar and in Baluchistan Province, Pakistan, which is semi-autonomous and often at odds with Islamabad.

Three Areas for a Strategic Approach

¶7. (S) Border Crossing by the Taliban: There is broad recognition that no matter how effective population-centered COIN is in southern Afghanistan and how many troops are present there, it will be possible for the conflict to continue at a slow burn as long as the Quetta Shura Taliban enjoy undisrupted sanctuary along with access to recruits and material support in Pakistan. Short of decisive measures against the Afghan Taliban leadership, securing Pakistani cooperation to halt cross-border movement of Taliban insurgents will be far more effective than interdiction from the Afghan side alone across the hundreds of kilometers of open country on the southern border. Recognizing that these talks would need to be initiated at the national level between the neighboring countries but could be ultimately coordinated at the local levels, one starting point would be getting Pakistan and Afghanistan to cooperate, with RC-South assistance, in halting positively identified Taliban from crossing at Weesh-Chaman.

¶8. (S) Border Coordination and Control: The Border Coordination Center (BCC) will benefit from clarification of its mission and repositioning. Posting a U.S. civilian agency border enforcement liaison with the current military Liaison Officers (LNOs) at the BCC would be a useful addition, as would the near-term stationing of mentors at the

border crossing. The BCC's current location on Forward Operating Base Spin Boldak eight kilometers from the actual border reduces its potential even for low level military-military communications. One solution would be to move it on an interim basis to the site of the proposed border crossing facility once the project, led by the Embassy's Border Management Task Force, gets underway.

¶9. (S) Military Control of the Border: Positioning U.S. military forces with the mission of establishing control at the Weesh-Chaman border crossing, as directed by the guidance issued by RC-S Commander, is sensitive and requires explicit definition. An existing presence in Regional Command) East (RC-East) helps channel traffic to Torkham Gate, but there are differences in conditions, and it is not clear, for example, exactly how the military presence may help ensure uninterrupted flow of NATO supplies or legitimate collection of revenues. This deployment would best be carried out in close coordination with the BIWG or the civilian entities at the BCC. An informal local agreement with the ABP that keeps U.S. forces out of Spin Boldak proper and allows direct access to the border only by exception will need to be modified, possibly by referring to Kabul for confirmation.

COMMENT

¶10. (S) A variety of issues should be addressed and steps taken to better control the porous southern border. However, it is important to view Spin Boldak and the southern border as a whole in order to grasp the degree to which the situation there has multiple and critical implications for RC-South operations, as well as for broader international coalition objectives in southern Afghanistan. There are incremental and programmatic measures that can be taken on the ground, such as stationing mentors with customs agents and border police to reduce corruption as a result of their day-to-day presence with the law enforcement officials. Ultimately, however, a determined strategic approach, formed at the national level with regional buy-ins and applications and unified diplomatic, military, and commercial dimensions is essential. U.S. civilians in RC-South will continue to support GIROA efforts to develop and implement such an approach.

¶11. (U) This message was drafted by the State Department Representative at the Stryker Brigade headquarters in Kandahar.
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